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DRAMA AND MUSIC

MR. CHESTERTON'S "MAGIC."—A NEW AMERICAN SONATA.—
THE PHILHARMONIC'S SEVENTY-FIFTH BIRTHDAY

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

SUPERFICIALLY, Mr. Chesterton is a mystical acrobat, a dizzying conjurer of intellectual rabbits and gold-fish and top-hats. Actually, of course, he is the perfect reincarnation of a Hebrew prophet, with a passionate and thunderous ecstasy, a capacity for rhapsodic discourse, which the makers of the Old Testament would have recognized as a spark from their own rhetorical conflagrations. An amazing man! Only the other day he was joyously exposing for us the essential Teutonism of Mr. Lloyd George, with an abandoned delight in the virtuosity of his controversial sword-play; and now we are all (all of us who go to the theatre, that is) thinking of his play, *Magic*, which is only a little older than the preëminence of Mr. Lloyd George, and which, like that troubled Prime Minister, has engrossed Mr. Chesterton as an opportunity for controversy.

To be sure, this play (which, as we write, is to be seen at Maxine Elliott's Theatre) is more than an exercise in rapturous dialectics: it is quite simply and clearly a parable, a parable that is somewhat too anxious to explain itself, too clearly marked with guide-posts and exit-lights—but yet a parable of haunting beauty and power.

Mr. Chesterton's protagonist, the Conjurer, master of devils and familiar of elves, who imperils the reason of the blatantly skeptical young atheist by performing at last a trick so appalling that he is compelled to invent a plausibly "natural" explanation for it: this Magician is merely, of course, a voice repeating the sublimest platitude of man's spiritual history—that only those things which are in-

credible are true. The Conjuror begins by talking of fairies (in modern England, outrageously enough), and ends by evoking demons out of Hell; but all the while you know that what he is really talking about is that Immortal Mystery of which Mr. Chesterton, in his Old Testament singing-robcs, can speak, when he wills, with so eloquent a certitude. "The difference between the things that are beautiful and the things that are there": it is with the abolition of this difference that his parable is concerned.

Our only regret is that the Conjuror felt obliged to reveal to Patricia (who, like Peter Pan's audiences, invincibly believed in fairies) the story of his past and the explanation of his occult capacities. We wish that Mr. Chesterton had put more trust in the mystical integrity of his parable—we wish he had been content to remain, to the end of this play that has levels of spiritual splendor, simply the uncompromising fabulist, saying to us, without too anxious a gloss upon his meaning, that which a great master of reality had said with so serene a brevity before him: "If at this moment you think or say something that is too beautiful to be true . . . on the morrow it will be true."

We are implacably at odds with Shakespeare in the matter of appellations: we think that there is everything in a name. Names are immeasurably influential. We cannot believe that Romeo would have meant all that he meant to Shakespeare and all that he means to us if his name had been Tomasso.

" . . . wherefore art thou Tomasso? "

Wherefore indeed? we should find ourselves echoing with incredulous dismay. Who would dare to say that if Mélisande's name had been Fifi she would have evoked the grave and wistful figure of M. Maeterlinck's loveliest dream? When you change a name you meddle with profound and mysterious forces. You alter a man's psychic image of himself when you alter his name—you change both his subjective and his objective relation to the universe. We have always contended that the whole course of our national life would have been different if Lincoln's first name had been Llewellyn.

We were reminded of this truth not long ago when we witnessed the instructive spectacle of that redoubtable young

American musician, Mr. John Powell of Virginia, making an elaborate half-hour apology before the admirably enterprising Society of the Friends of Music, and afterward at a concert of his own, because he had attached to his sonata for piano the title *Teutonica*. It is true that Mr. Powell's introductory talk did not have the form of an apology, and he will not be pleased with us for calling it that. Well, we are willing to call it an excuse, or an explanation, if Mr. Powell chooses—here again is that sensitiveness to a name! But the essential fact is that Mr. Powell, having given the title *Teutonica* to his sonata some time before the sound of that word had ceased to charm the civilized ear, felt obliged to announce to his audience that his music had nothing whatever to do with the things naturally suggested by its designation.

If one must regret that Mr. Powell was not sufficiently clairvoyant some time before the year 1914 to foresee the emotions his title would provoke in 1917, it is not chiefly because that title will inevitably place an obstacle in the way of the American concert-goer's friendliness of attitude toward Mr. Powell's music. That fact, to be sure, is sufficiently deplorable. Yet there is a chance that this sonata will outlast present international dislocations; and, in that future of almost incredible beneficence, we shall still have cause to regret that Mr. Powell chose to attach to his sonata a tag which is, for the anxiously sympathetic outsider, merely an exasperating and absurd misrepresentation.

It may be said that it is of no consequence what Mr. Powell chooses to call his sonata, if the sonata itself discloses music of beauty or power. But we cannot agree to that. There are, of course, obvious discriminations to be made. We are not discussing the kind of composer who casually affixes a pretty title like "Murmuring Breezes" to a facile piece of salon-music. We are discussing the kind of composer for whom music is a thing of intimate revelation—an art of emotional and spiritual projection. The title under which a composer of this sort offers a piece of new music is bound to condition his hearers' attitude toward it.

Mr. Powell's title for his sonata, and his own and his commentators' attempted justification of it, put a variety of obstacles in the way of the potentially responsive hearer. Here is the official explanation of the superscription and meaning of the sonata, the "insight and sympathy" of

which so pleased Mr. Powell, he says, that he printed it on the programme of his Aeolian Hall concert: "The word *Teutonica*," we are told, "is used in a broader sense than the merely geographical or racial. It would present the idea of a certain type of mind and character, a type universal in its essential qualities, and appearing, since the dawn of history, in all lands and times. As a few instances one might cite Lao Tse, Liae Dsi, Tschuang Tse, the founders of Vedantic thought, Heraclitus, Leonardo, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Goethe, Beethoven, Darwin, Spencer, Wagner, Haeckel. But in reviewing the historical field of philosophy, statesmanship, science, art, one observes a predominant proportion of this type among those races of Teutonic origin. Let this be the justification of the use of the word *Teutonica*. As varied as the above-mentioned leaders of thought were in many outer respects, there is little difficulty in establishing that common basis which justifies their being classified as belonging to one type. And that common basis can be expressed in a very few words—it is their sense of Oneness, or what the Germans call *eine einheitliche Weltanschauung*. This is the sense in which the motto is to be taken. . . . Is it not evident that the 'Teutonic' nature in the grip of the sense of Oneness would experience a logical chain of inevitable, ineluctable emotions; and is it not equally evident that these emotions, embracing as they must the deepest yearnings of the individual consciousness towards the collective All-consciousness, the tragic intensity of the struggle towards inner Oneness and harmony, and the resultant triumph through this guiding principle over all inner and outer hindrances in the attainment of the sense of Universal Unity and balance—is it not evident, I say, that these emotions are the deepest, truest, most poignant of all human experiences, and of necessity demand that utterance most adequate to their qualities—i. e., musical expression? The *Sonata Teutonica* is an earnest attempt to express this logical chain of emotional experience."

If Mr. Powell has a sense of humor, or a normal endowment of intellectual tact, he will do well to discard this chaotically absurd "explanation," and forego the attempt to link his music with the delightful concept of "the Teutonic nature in the grip of the sense of Oneness," "experiencing a logical chain of inevitable, ineluctable emotions." This metaphysical nightmare is a thing upon which the sincerest

friend of Mr. Powell's talents will not waste a moment. It is perfectly easy to see, of course, what Mr. Powell is driving at in his sonata—his basic idea is as familiar as human aspiration and as old as the soul of man. But why he fancies that the "races of Teutonic origin" have been specially favored as conservers of "the sense of Oneness" is a mystery too deep for even the most anxious sympathy to fathom.

It will be seen, therefore, that the intelligently concerned attendant upon the *Sonata Teutonica* has some rough ground to traverse, if he is so unwary as to permit Mr. Powell or the exegetes to expound the sonata to him in advance. If he is incautious enough to yield himself to the insidious voice of the commentator, he will find that he has spent most of his powers of concentration in trying to fit the first movement of the sonata to "the emotional effect of the sense of Oneness," the second movement to "the Universal Teutonic temperament," and the third movement to "the triumphant result in the world of outer activity of this principle acting upon this nature." If Mr. Powell will accept without offense our heartily amicable advice, he will at once and permanently detach his sonata from its title and its philosophical programme, and thus aid and encourage, instead of indisposing, future hearers of the work.

We have devoted space and time to these disagreeable observations upon the *Sonata Teutonica* precisely because it seems to us one of the most admirable works by a contemporary American that we have heard in a good while. Mr. Powell (as the casual reader may already have suspected) is a man of unimpeachable seriousness. He is interested in graver matters than the production of lifeless replicas of MacDowell and Debussy—an occupation which engrosses too many of our younger American composers. This Southern-born music-maker has spiritual and intellectual gravity, an independent vision. His art is robust, energetic, immensely earnest, conspicuously direct—an art long-breathed and muscular. It is romantic in derivation and style—romantic after the tradition of Schumann and Brahms rather than of Wagner. In its architecture it is intricate and heroic, an ample and imposing yet delicately moulded structure. Mr. Powell can be both simple and grandiose. He spans many emotional regions, exposes many moods, in this truly epic confession of spiritual agonies and triumphs. In a day when "external-ity" is painfully sought after in music as in other arts, Mr.

Powell compels notice by reason of an inwardness that is profound, honest, and unashamed.

His prime defect is the familiar one of most music-makers, including music-makers of genius: he is far too hospitable in his acceptance of ideas that are born on the lower levels of musical inspiration. The indispensable, the paramount, function of a musical mind of the first order, working at the top of its power, is censorship—rigorous, unflagging, unsparing vigilance in the scrutiny of every idea that flows out of the creative consciousness. It is the degree of continuity with which this function operates that accounts, of course, for the masterpiece of a second-rate man and for the failure of a genius—which makes the Sixth Symphony of Tchaikovsky a more precious thing than the Battle Symphony of Beethoven. Mr. Powell shares the infirmity of Beethoven (and of every other master)—that is to say, he is not a stern enough censor. But the difference in this respect between Mr. Powell and Beethoven is (he will not mind us saying) that Beethoven, in return for his not infrequent failures, could speak to us as one of the high gods. This is not yet Mr. Powell's privilege; but he can at least more heroically reject, and reject, and reject again.

We have all been celebrating the Jubilee Festival of the Philharmonic Society, which completes this year its seventy-fifth season. It was on December 7th, 1842, that the "Grand Symphony in C minor" of Beethoven opened the first concert of the Philharmonic's first season; and the other day, at Carnegie Hall, this same symphony (still truly "grand," even though the programme austere^{ly} refrained from saying so) was played again by the Philharmonic—the same Philharmonic, now venerable, yet a more puissant instrument of eloquence and beauty in the fullness of its years than ever it was before—a creature of expansive life and conquering energy, "mewing her mighty youth," and equipped for still larger adventures and aspirations.

We had thought to say something fitting and reasonably adequate about the Philharmonic's anniversary. But we persist in remembering the singularly touching and noble words that the President of the Society, Mr. Oswald Garrison Villard, spoke from the stage of Carnegie Hall at the opening concert of the Festival—words which have today an even more poignant significance than when he uttered

them: "Today," he said, "let no one forget that these walls a citadel of peace enclose. The pitiful waves of sound that beat across oceans moaning of bloody, unreasoning death pass by this temple of art. No echo of the strife without can enter, for here is sanctuary for all and perfect peace. Here talent nor genius knows aught of national pride. Herein meet citizens of one world to acclaim masters of every clime. No one asks: "Under which flag, Bezonian?"—nor cares; for musicians who play and musicians who compose are one in devotion to their muse. . . . Democracy? Here is its truest home . . . Here is communion of the soul, unseared by strife, unsoiled by passion. For our appeal is to the best and never to the worst; to what is divine in mankind, and never to the vile that lies just underneath. What more patriotic service is there or can there be than this: to cling to the ideal, come what may; to stem the tide that floats men down the stream; to steer them against it, up and up and up, to the fairest deeps, the noblest reaches, the purest springs?"

LAWRENCE GILMAN.